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REFLECTIONS

THE BLOODBATH

MR. NIXON and his Administration have repeatedly said that if we do not go on with the war in Vietnam, so as to keep the Communists from coming to power, there will be a bloodbath. The Republican Party platform reiterates the argument, congratulating this Administration for not having consigned the South Vietnamese to "the bloodbath that would follow Communist conquest." "Bloodbath" is a weighty word, if an inexact one. This afflicted century has seen a good many bloodbaths; it is rich in the experience of murders, deadened to the numbers. We have known Verdun and Passchendaele, Hitler and Stalin, communal slaughters on the Indian subcontinent and in Indonesia, and now we have Vietnam. We know too much of the reality of bloodbaths. Mr. Nixon and his party offer us a hypothesis, a threat, a conception of the future, to justify the things that America is doing now in Vietnam—things that, because they are actions, not hypotheses, can never be called back. The difference between present and future is the difference between reality and possibility. Fear, hope, and imagination play upon our conceptions of the future, but the present is what we are responsible for. It is vital to understand this.

There have now been more than a million Vietnamese soldiers and guerrillas killed in the war. This is the total for Vietnamese military casualties alone—compiled from the weekly figures that have been issued by the Allied command in Saigon since 1960. These figures may be wrong, since the Allies' claims of Communist deaths are probably exaggerated, but they are the only official figures we have. There are no Americans included in this one million, and no Vietnamese civilians, by official count, and no Laotians or Cambodians. Nor does the figure take account of the wounded or the missing.

The population of Vietnam, North and South, eight years ago, before the United States introduced American ground forces into the war and began bombing, was about thirty-two million. Thus, out of every thirty-two of the 1964 population of the two Vietnams, one is now a dead combatant or one

out of thirty-nine of the estimated combined population today. How many civilians have been killed? In 1969, the Defense Department made an estimate of fifty-two thousand civilian dead in the North from American bombing. That was in the National Security Council document—NSSM-1—that was prepared for the Nixon Administration's 1969 reappraisal of American war policy. No estimates have been made public of the casualties suffered in the North from this year's resumed bombing, which is unprecedented in its extent and violence. The only serious estimate of civilian casualties in the South which we have from an American government source is one that has periodically been prepared by Senator Edward Kennedy's Subcommittee on Refugees. It says that at least a million and a quarter noncombatant civilians were made casualties through June, 1972, with one-third of them killed or fatally wounded. That is over four hundred and sixteen thousand South Vietnamese dead. American government officials in Saigon say that nearly twenty-five thousand South Vietnamese civilians were wounded this year between March 31st and the end of August—twice the weekly average before the Easter offensive—but they offer no figures on deaths.

Civilian-casualty estimates are notoriously controversial, in part because civilians often die obscurely, and in part because in reference to Vietnam the United States government has obviously preferred to avoid or obfuscate this subject. But if we simply adopt the most conservative course, adding the official figures available on military and civilian deaths to the Kennedy subcommittee's numbers, and if we do not count, or think about, those other civilians killed in the North since 1969, we have a total of 1,468,000 Vietnamese killed. Let us take account of the unknown, then, to round out the figure, and say that there have been at least a million and a half Vietnamese deaths in this war. That is 4.7 per cent of the total population of North and South Vietnam in 1964. Is that a bloodbath?

The recent killings of landless peasants, pacification workers, militiamen, and others linked to the Saigon au-

thorities in the areas captured this year by North Vietnamese troops are cited to lend weight to Mr. Nixon's warnings of mass reprisals if the Communists take power. Communist security officers in the northern part of Binh Dinh Province are said to have brought with them dossiers on the people in the region and to have called before "people's courts" those who had worked for the Saigon government. Thousands of those tried were sentenced to imprisonment or to political indoctrination, and some were killed—perhaps as many as five hundred, according to reports given to the press in Saigon at the beginning of August. The killings were mostly executions by rifle fire, but cases of torture and of burial alive are alleged. However, five hundred selective killings among more than two hundred thousand people who had been living in the occupied northern part of Binh Dinh when this year's Communist offensive began amount to .25 per cent, and do not really constitute a bloodbath as the twentieth century has been privileged to know bloodbaths.

At Hué, during the Tet offensive in 1968, there were also mass murders, by the Vietcong, of people linked to the government and to anti-Communist political elements. At least four thousand are believed to have died; some responsible estimates have put the number as high as six thousand. Much earlier, in the mid-fifties, when land reform and collectivization were carried out in North Vietnam by the new Communist government, there were mass murders of landowners, rich peasants, and others identified by the Communists as obstacles to progress. The late Bernard Fall, perhaps the most detached historian of that period, said that "the best educated guess" at the number killed then was "probably close to fifty thousand." This is an imposing number of human lives, but since 1960 thirty times fifty thousand lives have been taken in the war. And this year fifty thousand have undoubtedly died since North Vietnam's Easter offensive began. So what is being saved?

How many would have to die under Communist rule in the future to make our present war policy morally, and

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